

How Did Christianity Begin?

Mike Bird on the Historical Jesus

Whereas the weakness of James Crossley's argument is, in my opinion, his failure to take into account at least the possibility of divine intervention in human history, Mike Bird's argument suffers from the another error. That is, he attributes to himself the ability, apparently, to know what the Historical Jesus thought. More on this momentarily.

Mike opens his remarks in the Introduction by observing, I think correctly, that '... as a Christian my task is not to peddle my presuppositions and call them evidence' (p. xvi) which sounds utterly superb. Until he goes and does what he says he wasn't going to do. 'I am genuinely interested in history and truth in its own right', he suggests, and continues '... what I want to do in this book is provide a commentary on these [the 5 areas of debate] by looking at the main threads in the various plots and subplots' (Ibid.). So, we are led to expect a fair and even handed explanation of the themes at hand with an eye to the historical sources. Great.

Now, having suggested that he won't 'peddle' his view and call it evidence, on page 17 he sets out to describe the Historical Jesus. He remarks in this connection as follows: 'To know Christ is more than knowing that he is divine and human, more than knowing that he died for our sins; it is a matter of knowing about his teachings and understanding how Jesus relates to Israel, to his followers and to his own contemporaries'. And already we have a breakdown in communication. Will Mike be describing the Historical Jesus (for which we have NO evidence outside the theological treatments of his life contained in the New Testament) or the Christ of Faith (for whom we have nothing but materials concerning in the New Testament). The answer is obvious. Mike is not interested in the Jesus of History and he finds no place in his treatment. Rather, Mike is presenting his readers with a portrait of the Christ of Faith.

Boldly Mike asserts 'The nature of faith ... and the nature of God's revelation ... demand that we participate in what is known as the Quest for the Historical Jesus' (p. 18). But of course this is simply false. Pious and good Christian folk have gotten along quite well from the beginning of the Church without any interest whatsoever in the Jesus of History. Why even the Apostle Paul claims that he had no interest in Jesus after the flesh. Is a greater than Paul here? Urging folk to behave in a way which the New Testament itself does not know and to which it never calls a single soul? It is no more necessary, or demanded, that believers pursue the Historical Jesus than that they pursue the Historical Paul.

Mike continues his examination of the Christ of Faith, um, I mean the Historical Jesus with sections on the Virgin Conception [shouldn't that be Virginal Conception?]and Miracles, neither of which can be proven historically and both of which are nothing less than faith claims having to do, of course, with the Christ of Faith and not the Jesus who walked the dusty plains of Galilee.

At this juncture I think it fair to assert that Mike, and others, would fault me for cutting the baby in half and talking of such a disconnect between the Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History. And, to be sure, it's a fair enough and widespread enough complaint. I would only suggest, again, that the materials we have in the New Testament have no interest whatsoever in the Jesus of History. They are altogether and wholly consumed with theological intent. I cannot escape the unpleasant sensation that all of these attempts to 'prove' this or that actually undermine faith rather than aid it.

You see, dear reader, Crossley ignores faith as a factor, and in his own way, so does Bird. His every sentence is aimed at proving what simply cannot be proven historically. Hence, he hinders faith rather than assisting it by placing it on a false foundation of 'works'. I.e., he places it on the foundation of what he and other historians are able to prove, and if ever there were a 'work', proof qualifies.

Bird next asserts, in his section on the message of Jesus about the Kingdom, that 'Jesus' preferred self-designation was 'Son of Man' (in what Bird evidently takes as a thoroughly Messianic

title- though of course this is neither necessary nor accurate). Son of Man just means 'human person'. See Psalm 146:3. And then, if you insist on reading Son of Man as a Messianic title, explain how one is, in that Psalm, urged NOT to trust such a one!

Mike continues, though, writing 'That leads to the question, did Jesus think of himself as the Messiah or the king of the coming kingdom?' (p. 27). And so we are led to believe that not only can we know what Jesus thought about himself (!), but we are also led to believe that Bird knows the inner workings of Jesus' mind (!!) considering the argument he then offers. After all, Mike's next segment asks the question 'Did Jesus think that he was God?' (p. 30). The answer to that is simple- we don't know. We do know what his followers thought. We know, in particular, what John thought on the subject! But what Jesus thought, in his own mind and soul, the Gospels never say and so it is hazardous to assert that we can discern such.

In short, just as I am uncomfortable with Crossley's 'non-faith' point of view (though he is of course free to believe what he wishes), I am also uncomfortable with Bird's bold assertions concerning what we can and do know about things that, simply put, we can't and don't know.